

[W. H. Thomas]

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Belief and customs - Occupational lore

Phipps, Woody

Rangelore

Tarrant Co., Dist. #7 [117?]

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W.H. Thomas, 67, was born on his father's farm in Collin Co., Tex. His father moved to Johnson Co., in 1872, and established a stock farm. Thomas learned to ride at an early age. He made a regular cow hand at 15. His father moved to Brown Co., in 1890, to establish a larger stock farm. After a crop failure, he moved to Throckmorton Co., in 1891, where he established another stock farm. Thomas was employed by Lyt Johnson of Throckmorton Co., in 1892, by [?] Davis in 1894, and Sam Davis from 1908 until 1914. He married Cobina Johnson of Brown Co., in 1894, and they now reside in the city of Throckmorton, Tex. His story:

"I was born on March the 11th, 1870, on my father's farm in Collin County. He moved the family to Johnson County in 1872 so he could take up stock farming. He was a man that loved stock but he knew more about farming than he did stock so he farmed for a living while he studied cattle raising. Being around folks that love stock and fine hoss flesh, a youngster will just naturally drift into the same feeling for cattle and hosses. I don't know

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just when I did learn to ride but I can't remember the time when I couldn't. Why, I made a regular cow hand at 15. Did everything any cowhand could do.

"I didn't have any real cowhand experience besides just herding and ordinary cowhand work because dad never had over 50 head at any one time. This was big enough a herd to give me experience in riding a hoss and getting cattle out of all sorts of scrapes but what I craved was the real West where there were outlaws, rustlers, and such. One day, dad comes in and says he has made enough money to get a bigger place in Brown County.

"Man! Man! Was I tickled over this news. Thinks I, now we'll get some real western stuff. C.12 - 2/11/41 - Texas [?] 2 I couldn't hardly wait to get there. I visioned thousands of cattle grazing on a limitless, fenceless range. Well, when we got there, dad established another stock farm with about 50 acres more land in cultivation than he had before which meant more work. There were fences and everything else just as there were in Johnson County.

"The year's result was a failure for everybody but me. I met the one gal that I wanted, and I sure wanted her but I wasn't but 18. The folks talked me into waiting 'til I got of age. Well, we sparked each other, and thought we would just be close to each other 'til I became of age, then we would get hitched up. That's where we counted our chicks before the eggs were laid. Crops made a failure and dad moved us to Throckmorton County, where he established another stock farm. I thought I never would get away from farming.

"Why, we had to haul our cotton 40 miles to Graham to the closest gin. Of course, that was in the day of old Jim, Beck, and the Springfield wagon. I remember my dad buying a Studebaker wagon after the first year's crop was marketed. Was he proud!? We went around to all the neighbors so he could show them the red wheels with the yellow spokes and all. I'll admit it was the classiest wagon but the only kind of a wagon I wanted to be around was a chuck wagon out on the range at stuffing time.

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"I griped and squawcked around 'til dad let me go find myself a berth on a ranch. The first day in Graham, I met old Lyt Johnson and he gave me a job right away. We had a spread about 17 miles Northeast of Throckmorton and run about 2,000 head with a YOU brand. 3 "When I went to Lyt's place, I didn't have the right kind of clothes for range work. I just had some blue denim work clothes because that's all dad would get me. You can sure bet your socks that it didn't take me long to get some clothes together. [Well?], in a way it did because my first month's salary was a saw buck with chuck. It took me seven months to get my stetson, boots, gun, and chaps. I got a little raise every month 'til I was getting \$25.00 and chuck a month.

"While I was working for old Lyt, I got the thrill of eating at the chuck wagon during the roundup. Eating around a chuck wagon is the best eating in the world. Nothing special, but good solid food like whistle berries, beef, sow belly strips, and some of the best sop in the world can be made from the grease you get from fried sow belly. One thing you could depend on at any time of the day or night, especially in the winter and that was the blackest coffee that can be made. I can just see the old coffee pot now, big enough to hold a couple gallons at a time, and a couple of egg shells floating around in it to settle the grounds. You hear different things about settling coffee grounds but the egg shell way worked pretty good. We never got but few eggs to eat and we always accused cooky of carrying the same egg shells around from year to year. We had a good cooky on Lyt's place, though. If everything was favorable, you could depend on a slice of pie two or three times a week, sometimes more.

Now, I haven't said anything much about the way we slept. During the Spring, Summer, and Fall, we would be out on the range nearly all the time. [hen?] we were into the ranch house, we had 4 bunk house. The bunk house life was swell for sure. We had music and singing just like you hear over the radio. I often hear folks saying that the cowboy never heard any of those songs. Well, a good many of the songs are new but we sang some songs that would burn the other up. The good church women would be trying to put the

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radio companies out of business. Out of 25 cow hands, you could always find three or four fiddle players and guitar pickers. While I never made a hand at singing, I could make a fourth when they needed a bass. I would be glad to name you some of the songs but they're about the same stuff you hear every day. The ones I could talk about, I mean.

"Now, about sleeping away from the bunk house, many's the night I spent out under the stars with a slicker for a cover, my saddle blanket for a mattress, my boots under my neck and my saddle for a pillow. Don't worry, after a hard day in the saddle, you'd be able to sleep well too. Occasionally, I've had a bed partner that I didn't go to bed with. and you'll think I was lucky for sure when I tell you that I was never bit. These bed partners were rattlesnakes. I've woke up with sand rattlers and diamond backs too. They would crawl in under the blanket or slicker for the warmth. [As?] long as you didn't hurt them, they wouldn't bite you. [A?] snake never bites unless he is afraid he will get hurt. I never rolled in my sleep because I was so tired when I went to bed that I just wanted to lay still and rest. If anything strange came around, I could depend on my hoss to come over and nudge me.

"When I come into Fort Worth here, I always look up my old cronies and we get together for a gab fest. Old Joe Reynolds 5 brought a news paper in here and showed us an article about a hitch hiker that saw a shelter and crawled in to go to sleep. A short while later, he felt something crawling on him. He felt of it, and it was several snakes. They had come to him for the warmth of his body. He didn't stay any longer but took right out and found out later that he had gone to sleep in the zoological gardens and the shelter he had picked out was for the snakes.

"The very worst stampede I ever saw was near Coree Texas. We had about 3,000 head of fat steers rounded up for auction, and had over a 100 head of hosses in the remuda. Well, about midnight, the steers and the remuda just scattered in all directions. You know, ordinarily, a stampede will go in a general direction and have a leader but this one didn't. They acted just as if the devil had jumped right up in the middle of them and hollered,

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'Boo! Well, we boys sure had a tough time. We rode all night and regathered a few of them. The next morning, we discovered that we had bedded them down right over some rattlesnake dens and there were three big fat ones stomped to pieces. We were a whole week gathering them back up. but we lost about 200 head. We got all the hosses back, though. This stampede business was tough and you had to expect them at any time. [Right?] when you weren't looking for one, that's when it come off. Especially if you weren't prepared. The rustlers used to cause stampedes but they were pretty well put down in my time. We missed a few mysteriously.

I went to work for [?] Davis in 1894. We ran about 3,000 head about 20 miles south of Throckmorton and his brand was, '666'. One of the things that happened while I was on Eel's place was 6 seeing antelope roped. Now, there used to be lots of antelope but they were getting pretty well thinned out and the only way we got one was by shooting it. We were rounding up a herd on Eel's place and somebody hollered, 'Antelope!' All the boys just stopped everything they was doing, no matter what position they were in. Even if they were branding, they ran for a hoss and a rope. All they boys closed in on the [antelope?]. The herd started to scattering but the boys didn't pay it no mind. One of them hollered, 'We can get it any time! Let's get the antelope.' Well, old Jim Carr roped that animal. He did it near where the present postoffice of Elbert is. Rufe Walker, the ram rod in charge at the time of the Coree stampede roped the other. He was a Mexico man and had a ranch in Presidio County but the ranch houses were on the other side of the river in Mexico.

"There is one thing a fellow has to watch out for the same as he watches for stampedes and that is, range fire. One can put a rancher out of business in a day's time. I recall back in 1908 when a traveler drove into a pasture owned by the Reynolds Land and Cattle company of Graham. Their brand was a big 'X', so we just called their property the, 'X pasture'. Well, this fellow let the fire get away from him and it burnt 40 sections of grass before we got it under control. We put that fire out by splitting cows open and dragging a half at a time across the edge of the fire. You know, a fire has a sort of a ragged, feather edge in front of it. Well, if you can get the leading part of it, you can best the main body

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of it. We commenced fighting about 9:30 P.M., and got it out about noon on February the 23d, the next day. 7 "Along about midnight while fighting the fire, I had coffee with J.D. Mounts. Now, there's a fellow for you. He would do anything and could say anything in front of anybody and get away with it. He goes down to Brewster County to marry a gal by the name of, Jane House. J.D. has an Aunt there and she asks him if he has a house in Throckmorton. J.D. says, 'Yes.'

"His Aunt says, 'When are you going to move in?' "He says, 'Tonight!' Old J.D. pulls a trick that I never saw outside of a movie. Four of us punchers are coming out of a saloon in Graham along in the wee wee hours of the morning when a masked gunman sticks us up. Well, with that thing looking as big as a cannon to us, we, 'Put 'em up'. He tells us to pass our sixers to him, one at a time and with the butts toward him. Now, J.D. was rolling a bull durham when we come out of the saloon, and he still had the t'baccy in the paper in his hand, and up over his head. When his hand gets even with his mouth on it's way down to his scabbard, he blows the t'baccy in the gunman's eyes and jumps to one side. The gunmen shoots but he can't see where he is shooting because the bull durham is burning him up. You try that some - time and see how it burns. Well, all four of us jump right on him and am stomping him right into the board walk when the sheriff comes running up after hearing the shots. He takes the man to jail but you know how those old time jails were. He got out that night and is still gone but he's carrying a souvenir from that stomping.

"Eel dies in 1908, and his son, Sam S.R. Davis takes over. [All?] the hands stays on because Sam is a square shooter. In 8 fact, he was a whole lot better to us than his dad was. I worked for Sam until 1914, when I left him to work with my brother, L. H. Thomas. L.H. married Eel's widow and they split the property in half. The widow took one half and gave it to L.H. and Sam took the other half.

"After several years with L.H., I borrowed some money to invest in oil land in Throckmorton. My investments were the best I could have ever made so I'm riding the crest now. I don't have to work any more. I just go around anywhere I want to, buy up

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some cattle and sell for or to somebody. In other words, in the days when I should have some money saved up to retire on, I'm making more money than I ever made in my life before.

"Cobina and I now live in Throckmorton by ourselves, and she does pretty much as she pleases the same as I do. We don't have any children. I sometimes think I would like to have some around but none has ever come our way so we help others in a small way to take care of theirs.